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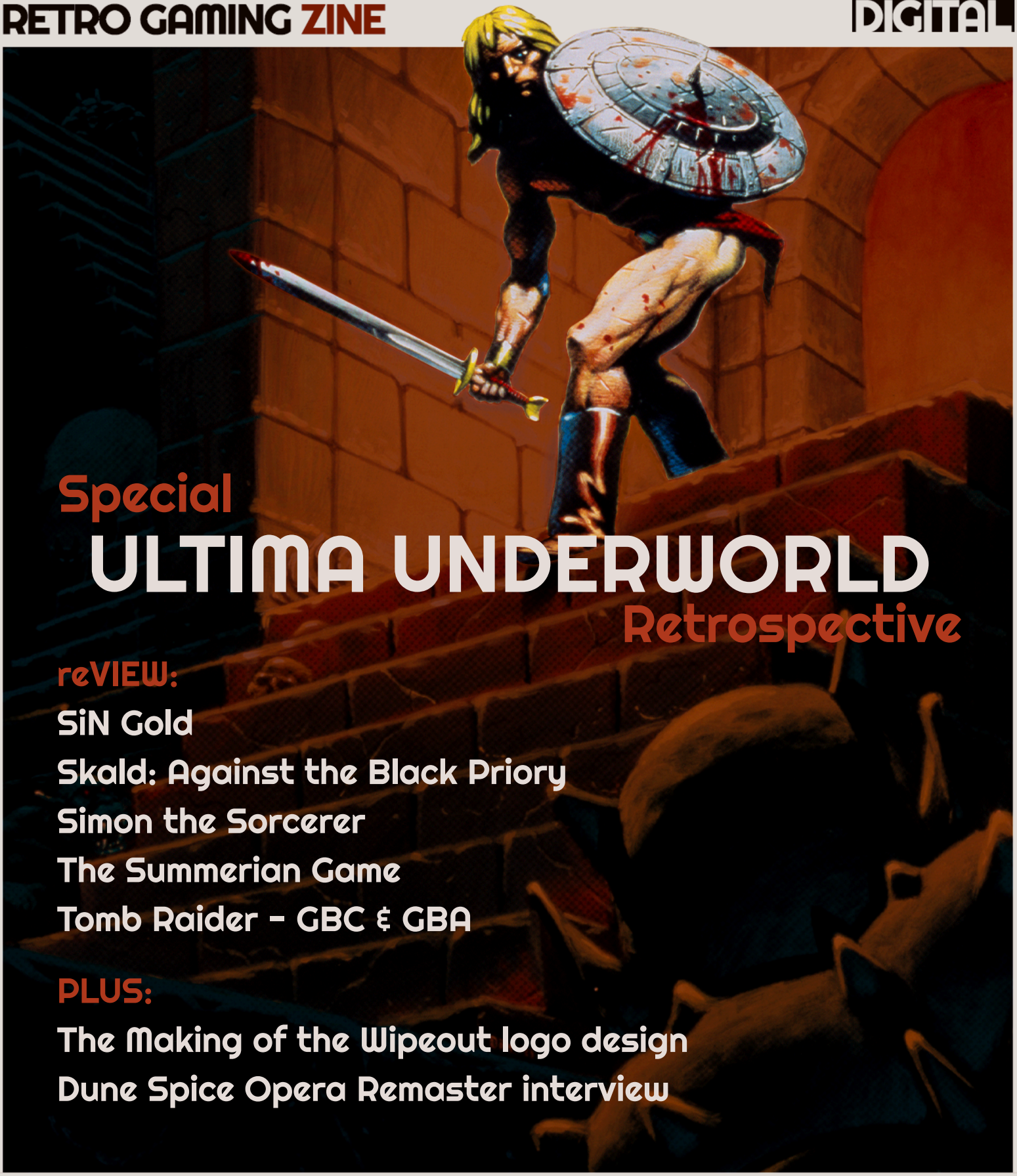

Special
ULTIMA UNDERWORLD
Retrospective

reVIEW:

SiN Gold

Skald: Against the Black Priory

Simon the Sorcerer

The Summerian Game

Tomb Raider - GBC & GBA

PLUS:

The Making of the Wipeout logo design

Dune Spice Opera Remaster interview

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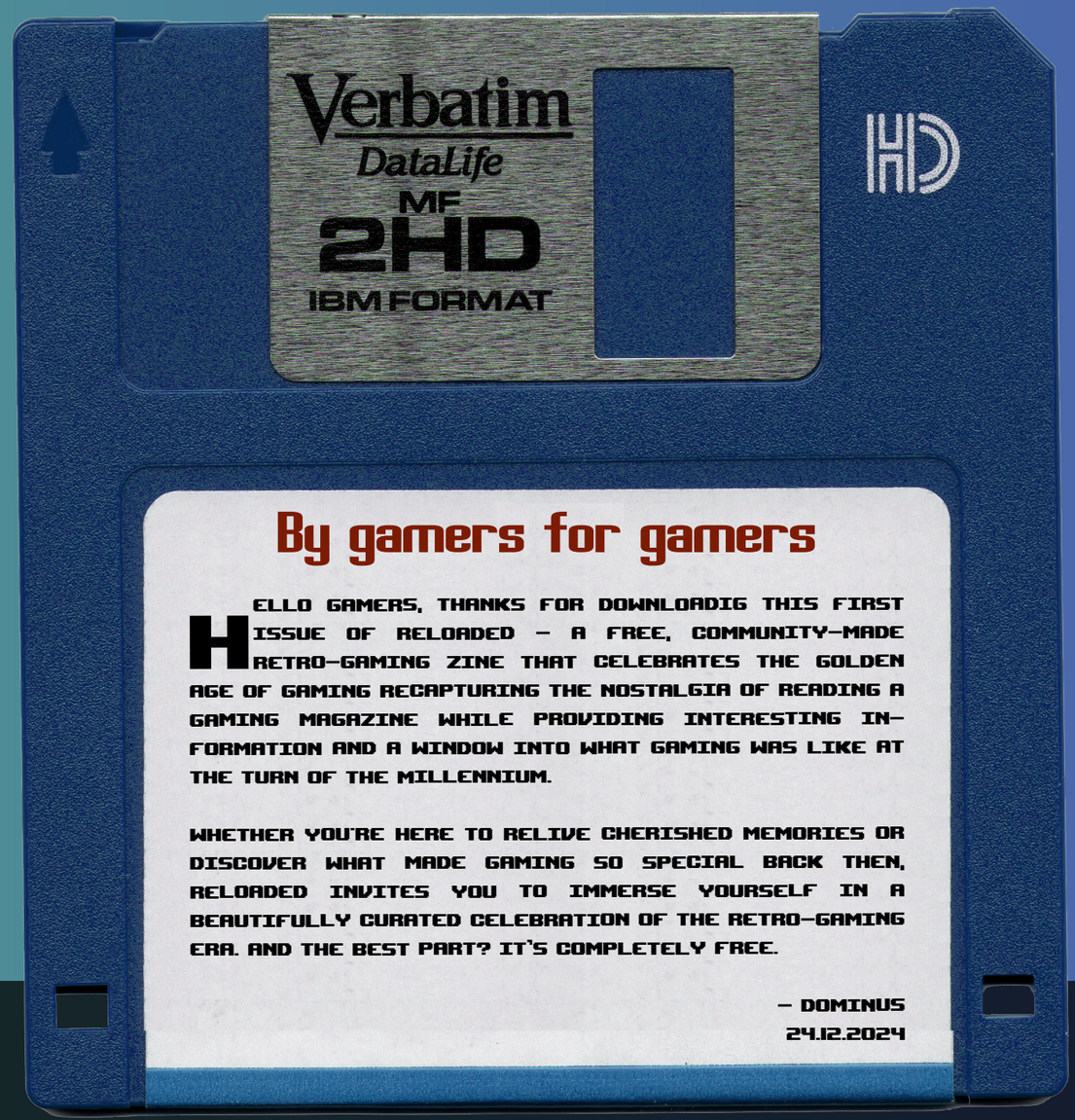
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– DOMINUS
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96% - C&VG

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Making of the "wipEout" logo design

In 1995 Sony was about to change the gaming landscape with the launch of the PlayStation console. The console's debut lineup needed a standout title, something futuristic and cutting-edge that would capture the imaginations of gamers everywhere. Developed by the Liverpool-based studio Psygnosis, Wipeout was a product of its time, infused with the rebellious spirit and electronic music culture that defined the 90s.

Psygnosis, already known for their innovative titles like Lemmings, was tasked with creating a game that not only showcased the technical prowess of the PlayStation but also resonated with the burgeoning rave culture.Wipeout's gameplay, with its lightning-fast races and thumping techno soundtrack, was groundbreaking. But to truly leave a mark, it needed a visual identity that was as revolutionary as the game itself. This is where The Designers Republic, a Sheffield-based design studio, entered the scene. Known for their bold, avant-garde approach, they were the perfect fit to create a logo that would become as iconic as the game.

00:34.0?

The birth of a futuristic aesthetic

Wipeout emerged in the mid-90's to define the futuristic racing genre and push the boundaries of visual and sonic design. But while the game itself blew everyone away with its speed and style, it was the Wipeout logo that became an indelible mark in the gaming world. How did this emblematic logo come to be?

In 1995, Psygnosis was riding high on the success of previous titles like Lemmings. Their next big project was a futuristic anti-gravity racing game that needed a visual identity to match its groundbreaking concept. The Designers Republic, a Sheffield-based design studio known for its avant-garde and bold approach. The Designers Republic wasn't your typical design agency. Founded by Ian Anderson, they were more akin to a rebellious art collective than a corporate studio. Their portfolio included album covers for electronic music giants like Warp Records, which made them the perfect fit for Wipeout's techno-futuristic vibe.

The design process kicked off with a series of brainstorming sessions and rough sketches. The team aimed to capture the essence of speed, technology, and futurism. The initial ideas were a mixed bag—some leaning too much into the sci-fi clichés, others too minimalist for a game bursting with energy. The breakthrough came when the designers decided to blend elements of Japanese pop culture, electronic music aesthetics, and a dash of their own unique flair. This melting pot of influences led to the creation of a logo that was both sleek and slightly cryptic, embodying the high-octane and enigmatic world of Wipeout.

The final Wipeout logo is a masterpiece of design simplicity and complexity. It features a stylized, lower-case typeface that gives it a futuristic and approachable feel. The use of smooth, rounded edges contrasts

wipeout
wipeout
wipeout
wipeout

Upon closer examination of the Wipeout logo, you'll notice that the letters are composed of partial '8' glyphs. Overlaying the Wipeout logo with Eurostile's '8' glyph reveals this clever design choice. But why the recurring '8's? On an LCD screen, all numerals in a 7-segment display are essentially formed from the '8' numeral. The inclusion of the ‘ and “ marks signifies minutes and seconds, highlighting the racing element and implying speed.

Why is the typography set in Eurostile? Since the late 60s, Eurostile and its counterpart, Microgramma, have been iconic in the sci-fi genre, representing futurism in user interfaces, signage, and interior design. This makes it an ideal choice for the futuristic setting of Wipeout. Each design decision in the Wipeout logo is intricately tied to the themes of racing and the game's universe, teaching us the importance of ensuring that every design choice is purposeful and meaningful.

with the sharpness of the gameplay, creating a balance that is visually arresting. One of the most distinctive elements of the logo is the stylized “e” in Wipeout, which resembles an upward arrow. This subtle tweak not only gives the logo a unique character but also symbolizes progress and speed—key themes in the game. The color palette was another crucial aspect. The choice of bright, almost neon colors reflected the game's vibrant graphics and pulsating energy, while also ensuring the logo stood out on the game's packaging and promotional materials.

The Wipeout logo quickly became more than just a game title—it turned into a cultural icon. Its influence extended beyond the gaming world, inspiring designs in music, fashion, and even architecture. The Designers Republic's work on Wipeout set a new standard for video game branding, proving that a game's visual identity could be as innovative and influential as its gameplay. The creation of the Wipeout logo was a perfect storm of creativity, cultural zeitgeist, and sheer design genius. It's a testament to the power of visual identity in gaming and a nostalgic reminder of an era when games were pushing every boundary they could find.

So, the next time you fire up Wipeout and zoom through its gravity-defying tracks, take a moment to appreciate the logo that's become synonymous with the adrenaline-fueled thrill of the race. It's more than just a name—it's a symbol of a time when gaming was all about breaking the mold and daring to be different.

· DOMINUS

FILE UNDER: ADRENALIN RUSH
12 RARE + EXTENDED MIXES
THE MUSIC
wipeout
デヴィナーズリパブリック
LEFTFIELD - CHEMICAL BROTHERS - NEW ORDER - AGE OF LOVE
ORBITAL - THE PRODIGY - MANIC STREET PREACHERS - SUNSCREEM
B.B. feat. ANGIE BROWN - ROBERT ARMANI - DREADZONE - THE SHAMEN

To promote the game, an official soundtrack CD was released separately, though its tracklisting deviated from the music that actually appeared in the title. The most notable absentee was CoLD SToRAGE, who contributed more to the game's soundscape than any other artist. Despite this, the soundtrack CD featured tracks from iconic electronic music artists like The Chemical Brothers and Orbital, capturing the essence of the 90s club scene.

www.thedesignersrepublic.com/wipeout

DUNE

SPICE OPERA

A celebrated French composer, **Stéphane Picq**, is renowned for his work in the video game industry, particularly for his iconic soundtracks for games like "*Dune*" and "*Lost Eden*." Stéphane's unique ability to blend atmospheric sounds with compelling musical narratives has left an indelible mark on the gaming world. His remastered album "***Dune Spice Opera***" has reignited interest in his work, bringing his timeless compositions to a new generation of listeners. Today, we delve into his creative process, inspirations, and the journey of remastering a classic.

Hi Stephane! Let's start from the beginning, what were your early musical influences and how they shaped your career as a composer?

Hello! The first music I was listening on the Sony cassette recorder that my father bought me for my 9th birthday, was from Ennio Morricone. My early influences are mainly: Pink Floyd, Tangerine Dream, Jean Michel Jarre, Kraftwerk, Klaus Shulze, Vangelis, J.S. Bach, Cerrone, Boney M, traditional Maghreb music. Later: Yes, King Crimson, Gong, Black Sabbath, Magma, Philip Glass, Steve Roach, Brian Eno, Peter Gabriel, Kate Bush, The Cure, Depeche Mode, Dire Straits, Chris Isaak, Talk-Talk, and a lot of world music, mainly from Africa or Middle-Orient, Tibet, Shamanic, and also Björk, The Orb, Dead Can Dance, Massive Attack, the beginning of acid-house, and all the techno-trance goa stream from the late eighties and early nineties….

What led you to the video game industry, and what were some of your first projects?

I was attracted very soon by coding, wich I started professionaly first on ZX Spectrum with a Nibbler-style game written in compiled basic when I was 18 (Lombrix), with even a full level editor. The game sold well, it was in 1983. I learnt the Z80 machine code by studiying the ZX spectrum ROM, wich was a state of the art programming masterpiece. Later I wanted to do a 3D bird simulator on Amstrad CPC 464, wich finally became a kind of "Space Harrier" oniric game, entirely coded in Z80 machine code, which didn't sold well because you weren't shooting things, just avoiding them.... I did the translation of "Bubble Ghost" from Atari ST to Amstrad in three weeks, and after that I had three months to learn the Amiga environment, the C-language, and convert Bubble Ghost again to it! It was painful and disgusted me from coding, but at the moment I had music for hobby, playing a Yamaha FP10 piano through an Ibanez delay, and was starting to do some blip blip music for some amstrad games, so I was delighted to do my first soundtracker music with samples for the opening screen. It was the start of my music career in computer games, doing two dozens of musics, mainly on the Amiga.

Dune: Spice Opera is considered a masterpiece in video game music. How did you approach composing for this game?

I was already a Dune reader and fan, and for me the fremens were clearly a kind of touaregs desert nomads. I wanted sandy, crispy, grainy sounds, and deep basses and sequences à la Tangerine Dream. My first tracks were "Free Men" and "Sign Of the Worm". After that, Philip Ulrich significantly influenced me, telling me that I had to think each track as part of an album and not as a film score, beacause he already planned the album to come...

How was you collaboration with Philippe Ulrich creating the original Dune soundtrack and do you have any stories regarding the original soundtrack CD?

I created alone the original soundtrack as we can hear it in the game, but taking in account some suggestions or directions from Philippe Ulrich. The album was a rework of this, at least on the tracks where Philippe's name is quoted. For instance "Wake-up" was originally composed to be only arpeggios, bass, and layers over a complex rythm (played live in one take). Philippe was worried that there was no melody at all, and told me "I want a fucking crying flute", and after having spent some time to build an expressive sound from two different samplers and a synth, I played it in one shot (with some minor edit). But he wanted absolutly a kind of "hit", and we spent a looooooooot of time on "Cryogenia", he was never satisfyied, and I did at least 30 versions, and we argued a lot on this, nearly fighting! Unfortunately IMO the best version was probably in the first half-dozen, but the master is lost..

What motivated you to remaster Dune Spice Opera? Can you describe the remastering process and any new elements or changes you introduced in this version?

I was not free to do whatever I wanted before 2022, or at least it is what I thought, because of a contract signed with Virgin Records in1992. Before june 2023 I had an old and weak computer, not enabling me to do a total replay with new sounds, which was my first intention. Some friends/fans convinced me that just a better sounding version should be ok, and because of the release of the Villeneuve Dune part 2 movie, it will be the good moment. I also had health issues, and thought that I should not wait more... I took my decision in september 2023, but even if I had a new monster computer (according to me), it was too late to think about a total replay, so I started to investigate different tools/solutions to just make a remaster out of the raw 1991 recorded material. I knew nothing about sound engineerinfg, and even thought to pay people to do the work, but finally I did as I did in my whole life: Learnt. After four months, I released the new version of "Sign of the Worm", and the feedback was good enough to make me confident to finish the work myself. I used many tools, like multiband compressor, dynamic equalizing, exciter, vintage equs, that I tuned myself for each track, and even dynamically real-time changing throughout the track. I tried some AI tools, but was not satisfied from the results...

How has your composition style evolved over the years? Are there any particular themes or elements that you consistently try to incorporate into your music?

I am more spontaneous, doing less edit, barely using quantize anymore, giving more space to silence, using less samples and more analog sounds.

How do you feel about the lasting impact of your music on the gaming community and beyond? What are your thoughts on the current state of video game music and its evolution since you started?

After having spent more than 20 years far away of all this, and without any feedback, now that I am being public again and communicating with my small community of fans, I am suprised how some musics I did had such a deep impact on some people (according to what they say), and it makes me very happy to have been useful to their own happiness or self development...

How has the advancement in technology affected your work and the way you compose music? Are there any modern tools or software that you find particularly useful in your composition process?

VSTs are great. Having your whole studio in one box with a flat screen was my dream 30 years ago, with no RAM limitations and every imaginable sound available. But at some moments, the time it takes looking for a particular sound in my huge library is equal or superior to the time I spent to program it in this era!

Is there a particular piece of music you've created that holds a special place in your heart?

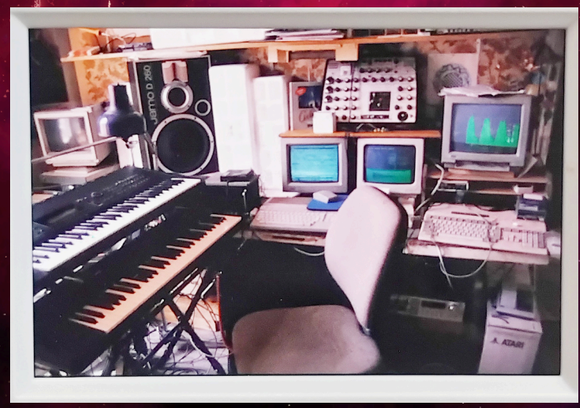
Lost Eden is my most personal music, after the success of "*Dune*", they let me do whatever I wanted, and I had absolutely no interference from anyone. I was totally free.

What advice would you give to aspiring composers looking to enter the video game industry?

"Be yourself, but let the boss think that it was his idea!"

Can you tell us about any upcoming projects or collaborations you are excited about?

I am planning to do a real replay of Dune, but before that, I have to finish a brand new electro progressive album I am working on since june. Also remixes of Megarace and KGB.



Stéphane Picq's Dune studio 1990

The Sumerian Game

one of the most important games in video game history

– Petru Balcau

The history of video games is simply fascinating! Not only because it is a fairly recent domain, but also because it is a story of innovation, passion and creativity, filled with exceptional people that contributed to it in very interesting and surprising ways! Sometimes, these contributions were hailed as revolutionary from the very beginning, while other times they were lost through the years only to be recently rediscovered and their true impact properly understood. Such is the case with The Sumerian Game, often called “the most influential computer game people don’t know about”. It was truly a ground breaking game for its time! Nowadays considered the grandfather of city management games, it managed to amass a series of other first time records as well! It was the first edutainment game, the first narrative driven game, the first game with in-game cutscenes (although the term “in-game” is very loosely applied here, since the cutscenes in question were projected on an exterior projector), the first ever game with a writer (Mabel Addis, who was then a fourth grade teacher), and, at the same time, the first game with a female writer.

But, what exactly was The Sumerian Game? The Sumerian Game was a computer game released in 1964 that could be played on an IBM 7090 time-shared mainframe computer. It was a text-based teletype city builder/economic simulator where the player would take control of the Sumerian city-state of Lagash and handle its affairs by playing the role of one of its rulers (Luduga I, II and III).

The game started as a joint research project between the Board of Cooperative Educational Services of Westchester County, New York and IBM between the years 1964-1966, with the aim of investigating the educational value of computer-based simulations in schools. The project was the brainchild of Bruse Moncreiff of IBM, was coded by William McKay and was designed by Mabel Addis. The idea to set the game in ancient Sumer was chosen in order to protest against the growing tendency in school education to focus too much on Ancient Greece and ignore previous civilizations.

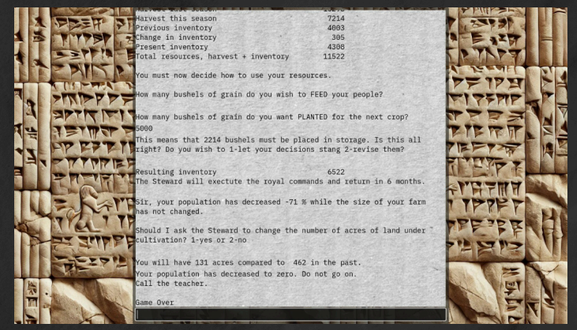
The game had 2 editions. The first one was released in 1964 and was played by a group of 30 students, while a second version with more narrative and audiovisual elements was released in 1966 to a second, larger group of students.

The Sumerian Game was played using a teleprinter, a device where both the text input and output were printed on a sheet of paper as opposed to a monitor. The game was composed of three segments, each one of them representing the reign of a different ruler (Luduga I, II, and III) of the city of Lagash, in Sumer, at around 3500 BC, and challenged the player with a series of increasingly complex economic simulations.

The first segment of the game, representing the rule of Luduga I, begins by presenting the player with the current population, farmland, harvested grains and grains in storage. The game then asks the player to decide how much grain will be used as food for the people, bushels to be planted or food to be placed in storage. Depending on the player’s decision, random disasters and events that can occur, the population will grow, stagnate, or even decrease. All the in-game questions, events and situations are being presented to the player through the “voice” of the Steward, who narrates the situations in a role-playing way, thus creating a narrative device meant to immerse the player in his role as ruler. This segment ends after 30 rounds, each lasting 6 months of Ludaga I’s life, after which all progress is reset to allow the player to start the next segment of the game with the next ruler.

The second game segment represents the rule of Luduga II, and it now allows the player to assign the surplus food to develop several crafts that can lead to innovations, while the third segment, the reign of Luduga III adds trade and more complex economic choices. Throughout the game, the player stops to see slides and cassette-driven cutscenes on an exterior monitor that help educate him and immerse him further in the world of Ancient Sumer.

Sadly, information about the game segments belonging to the rules of Luduga II and III have mostly been lost, with the exception of a few descriptions, gameplay printouts and slides. However, the first segment, the rule of Luduga I, is currently playable entirely for free on Steam! The game was rebuilt in 2024 by Andrea Contato, a video game historian and die hard enthusiast, and comes in two versions, the 1964 version, which tries to be as historically accurate as possible, and a revised version, which tries to include missing content, slides and other atmospheric effects. Link to the Steam version of the game can be found at the end of this article.


Harvest this season 7214
Previous inventory 4003
Change in inventory 305
Present inventory 4308
Total resources, harvest + inventory 11522
You must now decide how to use your resources.
How many bushels of grain do you wish to FEED your people?
How many bushels of grain do you want PLANTED for the next crop?
5000
This means that 2214 bushels must be placed in storage. Is this all right? Do you wish to 1-let your decisions stang 2-revise them?
Resulting inventory 6522
The Steward will exectute the royal commands and return in 6 months.
Sir, your population has decreased -71 % while the size of your farm has not changed.
Should I ask the Steward to change the number of acres of land under cultivation? 1-yes or 2-no
You will have 131 acres compared to 462 in the past.
Your population has decreased to zero. Do not go on.
Call the teacher.
Game Over

Even though “The Sumerian Game” was only played in two separate sessions to a relatively small number of people, it spawned a number of highly influential games based on its concepts. Among them, King of Sumeria (aka The Sumer Game) in 1969 and Hammurabi (aka Hmrabi) in 1973 translated its concepts in other, more popular programming languages and could be played on monitors as opposed to teleprinters, thus increasing its popularity and appeal, while Kingdom (1974), Dukedom (1976) and King (1978) further expanded on its concepts and changed the narrative setting. Ultimately, Santa Paravia en Fiumaccio in 1978 even added graphics and modified the concepts of The Sumerian Game to become one of the earliest God Games!

In conclusion, by pioneering groundbreaking gameplay and narrative ideas and kick starting the entire city management genre by itself in the early days of computer games, The Sumerian Game rightfully deserves to take its place as one of the most influential games in computer and video game history! Play it now and experience this important part of history for yourself!

DECUS No. FOCAL-5

The Sumer Game

Doug Dyment, Digital Equipment of Canada, Ltd., Carleton Place, Canada

This is a simulation program/game which will run on a minimal PDP-8 system. The economy of a Sumerian city in the year 3000 B.C. is simulated in the fashion of a modern-day "business game."

Many thanks to Contato, Andrea for all our discussions regarding the history of “The Sumerian Game” and for building the modern version and making it accessible on Steam for everyone! Looking forward to seeing the game develop even further!

Review by Damiano Gerli

Skald is a ship that goes back to the past and will make us enjoy all kinds of strange and horrifying things along the journey. With satisfying combat, well written narrative and a great soundtrack and pixel art, this might really be one of the best ways to feel nostalgia today.

Back in the 80s, playing an RPG meant that you were a serious player. Since often these games did not offer much in terms of graphics, and not even in terms of gameplay outside of a few classic D&D inspired mechanics, you had to be a fan to follow the genre. To make matters more complicated, SSI games required you to keep close a logbook where all major events in the game were described. So, does that imply that Skald: Against The Black Priory, as a true homage to these days of yore, requires that you keep a pen and paper with you at all times? Luckily not, but that's because its way of rejuvenating the mechanics of those classic rpgs for a potential new audience is not simply about bringing them back as they were.

Skald opens on a ship in the middle of a ferocious storm. After being startled awake, you go through a quick tutorial, and will have to immediately take care of a riot onboard between the sailors and the hired mercenaries. Which side you will take is the first of many choices, while in this case it won't have huge repercussions, this is how Skald eases the player into how each choice will shape future quests and events. In this case, you might be attacked later by other characters or, perhaps, be helped. After this scene, you go through a flashback explaining how you got on the ship and your mission.

In the tradition of classic RPGs, on the world map we can move in real time, but we'll be fighting with turn-based combat. Luckily, Skald doesn't follow in the steps of the SSI rpgs of yore, but keeps a third-person perspective all the way. Moving around can be performed with both keyboard and mouse, and it works pretty well as you will be resource hunting and scavenging pretty much at all times. Indeed, your party needs to be kept fed, which is the main way to restore health while camping, and anything that might be edible is better to be picked up.

The narrative keeps things strictly on an Eldritch horror vibe, with creepy Lovecraftian vibes in abundance. Right from the first attack on the ship, and the later events taking place on the island, you will be cast down in horrors described in accuracy and frightening detail. For example, very much of note are the two ghost children in the well, which the mother sends you down to make sure they are okay. Well, without spoiling too much, let's just say they are way past okay. While there will be plenty of sub quests to pick up, they all feel pretty natural and follow quite a sensible order as well.

Combat, as mentioned, is turn-based, your characters can perform most of the actions you would expect from an RPG of its ilk. Spell casting, backstabbing, using long ranged weapons and so on. It all works as it should, along with some crunchy sound effects when critical hits are performed. It does feel to be a bit cumbersome to manoeuvre at times, in fact I could never really figure out how to get behind an enemy to perform backstabbing efficiently. It seems to be more of an interface or control issue, than a gameplay one. But it's minor and, overall, combat feels satisfying and smooth.

While the game is not very long, that is a choice I can get behind, as it does not try to do too much with a limited but sensible narrative framework of finding a missing person on a cursed island. It does lay the foundation for future things to come in the universe, so in that way it works perfectly. Also, cannot ignore that beautiful pixel art which does wonders in bringing to life the characters and monsters of Skald. Finally, an atmospheric synthwave soundtrack which complements the action too, while not falling into the usual "8-bit" soundchip framework which we have definitely heard enough of.

But I do have some issues with the pacing, which is way I held from a much higher rating. It does feel that combat gets in the way of the narrative and the pacing more often than not. This is not a problem about random fighting (which happens only on the main map) and not about respawning, since enemies stay dead, but rather of how combat feels. Most times, fights are just unavoidable, everywhere and everything you do. While you are exploring to solve quests and progress in the story, expect to run into enemies again and again. While this comes with the "paying homage to the 80s classics" vibe, everyone who played those games should feel right at home. Still, personally, I wouldn't have minded if Skald was a little more flexible on that front. Perhaps having a way to solve quests that would not require your team to get into fights. It is a good idea to hire a mercenary as soon as you can to fill up your party, since that will make fighting a tad easier. But having an alternative, to just having to get into combat and survive, would have made Skald a bit more varied.

Still, overall, there is little to complain. Everyone who feels pangs of nostalgia towards a certain era of RPG, will get thrown right back to these days. But luckily Skald is not simply a nostalgic exercise, instead it tries as hard as possible to present itself as a classic feeling rpg, with an exquisite narrative to boot. Also, it does not force the player to keep a logbook handy at all times! Skald feels like it takes the right inspiration from the past, while also doing its own thing and caring about its universe and story.

TOMB RAIDER
GBC & GBA

When I was younger, I was always convinced that the first Tomb Raider game got a sort of remake on the Game Boy Color. It makes a lot of sense in my mind, since the title of the game was Tomb Raider. And in the same time period, Indiana Jones and the Infernal Machine also got a port to the Game Boy Color. That game was an interesting remake in 2D. Now, we are not here to discuss an Indiana Jones game, so let us focus on the Tomb Raider games.

I do not always do research before I start playing a game. This game is one perfect example. I just started the game up, expecting the story starting with a rendition of the Ice Caves. But, to my surprise, the game started up different. The actual subtitle of the game is The Nightmare Stone. On the box-art, we just got Tomb Raider as a title. On the box-art, we see that Lara is running away from an erupting volcano and behind her, you see several skeleton enemies. The bottom section is reserved for company logo's like Eidos, Core Dynamics, the licensor Nintendo, and the publisher THQ. We also got the "Only on Game Boy Color" triangle in the left corner.

The game was released in June 2000. On June 7th, North America, Europe got it on June 28th and the UK two days later. Only Australia got the game a little bit later. Their version got released on July 18th. Nowhere on the box-art, the game got the subtitle The Nightmare Stone. The game just released as "Tomb Raider" in North America and released as "Tomb Raider: starring Lara Croft" in all other regions. This is a practice also done with the other Tomb Raider games. It would have been easier if they just added the subtitle, to make conversation easier.

The critics gave Lara Croft is first entry on the Game Boy Color very high praise. Various gaming magazines and websites gave this title 8 or 9 out of ten. The average score of this title is 79% on the aggregator GameRankings. One of the lowest scores I could find was by a German magazine named 64 Power in their June issue, giving it a three out of 5 or 60%.

Since Core Design developed this game, it will not be a surprise that you find a lot of developers on this game also worked on the main Tomb Raider games. This game was developed by people who knew how a Tomb Raider game should play. In this title, Lara is hunting after the Nightmare Stone. This stone is in possession of a treasure hunting group who wants to use it to release the evil god Quaxet, a factious god in the Mayan mythology.

Playing through this game, you really want to play through a Tomb Raider game. Of course, there are some big differences since the game got released on a handheld. The most obvious difference is that the game is in 2D. There were only a handful of 3D Game Boy games, and most of them did not involve jumping. Another significant difference with the main line Tomb Raider games is that this game plays a lot slower. The controls are more limited on the Game Boy Color, and more action-packed gameplay could not really be implemented, per se without it becoming really clunky.

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Speaking about the controls, it takes some time to get used to. I mostly played platformers or adventure games on the Game Boy, and I was so used to push the A button to make my character jump. But Lara jumps with the up arrow in this game. Not only that, if you want to climb up ledges, you need to hold B. Which is the button you use to run. If you are moving left or right and press B, Lara starts running. When Lara is running, and you press the jump button, Lara jumps in the direction she is running. This gives you a hint how to jump a gap when standing still. You have to press B first before the jump button to jump over a gap.

This control scheme is quite ambitious since there is no real tutorial in game explaining the controls. You do not have a training or testing level in Lara's home. The manual explains these things quite well, but if you bought your copy today from a garage sale without the manual, I would advise you to look for it online. The control scheme is something that you will not really expect from a Game Boy game.

Earlier, I mentioned that this game has a slower pace compared to the main line Tomb Raider games. That was intentional. If you start running everywhere, you will find that this game will be quite harsh and brutal. There are several pits and gaps that either eat a good chunk of your health or kills you right away. Enemies are also hidden everywhere, and their damage can be unforgiving.

You cannot save where you want in this game, since the save crystals from early Tomb Raider console games return in this game. Learning where the save crystals are important. It is the only way you can save, and it is you respawn spot when Lara losses all her health. The save crystals are not close to each other, either, so I was always happy to find one.

If you do not really know the controls, it can feel a bit like trial and error. For example, I did not know that when you are running and jump, Lara will land further than from a standing jump. I did not expect this mechanic to be in the Game Boy Color games as well. Other things like dynamite being able to use to explode walls, which is something I'd have loved to get explained to me.

Overall, visually, this game is extremely impressive. Once everything starts clicking together, and you get used to the controls, this game is a hidden gem on the Game Boy Color. When you know what you are doing, this game takes around 4 hours to play through. For a first playthrough, I would say that you can finish this game in roughly 15 hours.

The game must have been quite successful since a year later we got a new adventure in the same engine and style. Eidos tried to get this game released around the time the first Tomb Raider movie released. Tomb Raider - Curse of the Sword, released in late June in North America and in August in Europe.
This time, the game was not released by THQ, but by Activision. Most of the team who worked on the first Game Boy game also worked on this title. Because this game got a shorter development time, this game is shorter compared to the first Game Boy Color game. If you know what you are doing, this game can be beaten in two and a half hours. For a first playthrough, I estimate that it will take 8 to 10 hours.

The sequel got the same reception from critics when it released. This game still shows off impressive visuals for the Game Boy Color. Remember that the Game Boy Color is an 8-bit system, and these two Tomb Raider games had such fluid animations that it looked next-generation. Did you know that there are over two thousand animation frames per game to make the animation work? Lara's model is also forty-eight pixels, making her one of the most detailed characters on the Game Boy Color.

Personally, I feel like both games are amazing entries into the Tomb Raider series. While they play quite different from their console and PC counterparts, both are an amazing adventure through various locations. You still must solve various puzzles and platform your way around. In Curse of the Sword, you even have a chase sequence on the rooftops.

When I look with a critical eye at these two games in 2024, I would say that the lack of a tutorial for the controls really hurts the game. Also, some people might be put off from the difficulty level of this game. These games have some really difficult sections. Use the save

crystals well! Otherwise, you might lose a lot of progress. And if I am really nitpicky, I could say that some areas would benefit from a map screen. But the levels are a bit too complex for those and with the small Game Boy Color screen, the map might not be even readable. Thankfully, there are various sources online, like Stella's Tomb Raider site (tombraiders.net) that have amazingly drawn maps.

When you read this, you might think that beating these games without a walkthrough is almost impossible. But do not worry. These games are quite linear and straight forward. I rarely got stuck in these games by not knowing what to do next. Most of the time, I did not know I was able to perform a certain action or how to solve a certain puzzle. The streak of releasing a new game every year continues in November 2002.

The Game Boy Color was on its way out, and the next title was released on the Nintendo Game Boy Advance. For this title, Ubisoft Milan was tasked with creating a new game. That is because the main team was working on the sixth main title, Angel of Darkness. Tomb Raider - The Prophecy was released to mixed reviews. It released in early December in Japan.

This game played quite different compared to the Game Boy Color titles and played more as a top-down isometric puzzle platformer. If I am very honest, this is the gameplay style I expected more of the Tomb Raider series on the Game Boy. It is mainly because I associate Tomb Raider more as a top-down game on handhelds than it being a 2D side view game. The Game Boy Color version of Indiana Jones and the Infernal Machine showed me it was possible to have a game like that on Game Boy Color.

The story of this title is about the Tome of Ezekiel. In this tome, a story is told about three magical stones that bring great power. She faces a big cult by the name of Teg-du-Bhorez. The game takes about 6 hours to complete on a first playthrough. If you really know what you are doing, this game can be beaten in 2 hours and a half.

Honestly, for a portable Tomb Raider adventure, I really enjoyed this one. It is a rather underrated gem in my opinion and really can be quite exciting to play. Especially since the formula really works this way on the Game Boy Advance. The big issue is that reviewers compared it too much to the mainline series, which is quite unfair to do. What I can agree with, is that this game can feel a bit repetitive at times in terms of puzzles and level mechanics. But it is way less repetitive compared to the Game Boy Color titles, since a lot more puzzle solving like statue placing is used.

The final Tomb Raider title on the Game Boy line of platforms came in 2006. After the very mixed reception to Angel of Darkness, the IP was given to Crystal Dynamics and Tomb Raider Legend was born. Talking about that, can be an entire article in itself. But, to close off this article, I want to quickly focus on Tomb Raider Legend on the Game Boy Advance. I know there is a port to the Nintendo DS, but I do not have any nostalgic memories for that one. I do have nostalgic memories for the Game Boy Advance port.

Now, let me tell you, the Game Boy Advance port was rough. The game went back to the style in like the Game Boy Color games. Yet, it also tried to do intractable doors. I can totally understand why reviewers back in the day were extremely negative about this game. Especially, since the console and PC versions of this game were such a blast of fresh air in the series.

Still, why did I beat this title 100% three times? Because, it had a certain charm. You could find various secrets in the game to unlock secrets like concept art or even cheat codes. But you were not able to see if you got all treasures in a level. The jumping and swinging controls were a bit awkward, yet you had very forgiving checkpoints.

There are a few things that stick with me to this day, the fact that the final boss is rendered a joke in this version. Just mash the attack button and you easily win. No matter the difficulty. Also, the mini-games and exploring Lara's home were fun distractions as well. Moreover, I want to thank all the pizza boys who delivered me pizza during the writing of this article, like in the credits of this game.

And with that, I want to wrap up this brief nostalgic look into the 4 Tomb Raider titles on the Game Boy Color and Advance. My name is NekoJonez and if you enjoyed my writing and want to read more of my work, you can find me over at: https://arpegi.wordpress.com. I want to thank you all for reading my article, and I hope you enjoy the work of the other writers in this magazine. But for now, I am out! I hope to welcome you in another article but until then, have a great rest of your day and take care!

- NekoJonez

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SIN

GOLD

SUBWAY

Arriving early to the late 90s

Twenty-six years ago, the FPS genre was still full of possibilities. In terms of storytelling, on the tangent of horror and sci-fi, the world experienced a cascade of masterpieces that redefined the genre after its early, formative releases such as *Doom* or *Quake*. 1998 was the year that presented the world with the misadventures of Prisoner 849 on Na Pali in *Unreal*, and later the more diegetic, immersive unforeseen consequences of Gordon Freeman's terrible, no good, very bad day at the office in *Half-Life*. It was perhaps a simpler, more naive time, but it arguably allowed the game studios of the era a more flexible language with which to captivate audiences and make their mark on a growing industry.

Overshadowed by the wide-reaching success of these cornerstone titles was a lesser-known shooter called SiN. Not without its merits, the somewhat campy but equally dystopic foray into the dangers of unchecked corporate evil didn't quite manage to sell as much as its publisher, Activision, would have hoped. Why, though? Was it guilty of mediocrity or simply a victim of a oversaturated market that hadn't yet achieved mass appeal? In an effort to answer a question nobody asked in over two decades, I bought the damn game in its most modern iteration, yet another oeuvre restorated by Nightdive Studios.

A gun without a badge

It's the year 2037 and while science has made significant strides forward, it sacrificed one of its most essential stabilizing institutions: the police. Consequently, private military companies have risen to take up its role, cleaning up the megacities of roving bands of criminals at the behest of their corporate overseers.

Enter our protagonist. John "Rusty" Blade is a unit commander working for HardCorps, protecting its interests against encroaching competitors and presumably pundits making fun of its on-the-nose name. John's mission control guy and main comic relief is J.C., a snarky hacker who will occasionally reveal alternate routes, optional objectives and nuggets of lore. Most of the game's dialogue revolves around these characters, with the occasional mook one-liner thrown in for good measure, and brief cutscenes will break you away from the action to reveal just enough of the mystery to keep you going.

The game's inciting incident is a bank robbery perpetrated by SinTEK, a biotech company led by Elexis Sinclaire, your antagonist dujour and a thoroughly evil vamp with all the mastermind scientist energy Denise Richards brought to *The World is Not Enough*. The fact that flashes of it stuck with me all these years is really a testament to how memorable it is, despite the underwhelming variety in character models and props.

Blade's entry is pretty bombastic: he shows up in a chopper, behind a minigun, avenging a pigeon's untimely end with his own brand of rent-a-cop justice. Then he starts mowing down robbers with a minigun and later giving you the option of shooting down a billboard and creating an alternate opening into the bank. Luckily, the bad guys give in to their greed and turn what was supposed to be a simple deposit box grab into a full-blow heist, giving you enough time to slaughter them all. Later, you make your way through sewers, chemical labs, construction sites, with the majority of the levels stretching out like industrial mazes.

The early level design also showcases most of the features that separate SiN from other shooters: blowing people's heads up with well-aimed shots is both gory and the fastest way to go through levels. Guns feel punchy and while most of them are of the hitscan variety, it's not just the heads that show localized damage. Leaning into the game's raunchier side, you can shoot clothes off hostages to reveal nipples, while grenades will outright gib whoever's unlucky enough to be in range. Speaking of nades, they're one of the most obvious tells that the game runs on Quake II's engine and a testament to the feel of late 90s shooters. There's depth and variety in all the interactive props and the integration of vehicles, but you have to remember that this is really early stuff and while ambitious, the implementation and physics are hit and miss. And if you're not put off by the blocky decor and urban chromatics, there's enough substance to enjoy and even the odd surprise here and there (I frankly forgot all about it, but was pleasantly surprised to discover the solutions you have to apply to finish specific levels, from flooding craters to jumping through temporarily-stopped giant fans).

In line with its 20-Minutes-Into-The-Future setting are the various computers you can and must access to progress: you can type in commands manually in Command Prompt-like interfaces, discover easter eggs and secret bank accounts by trying out PIN codes on bank terminals, and generally interact with all sorts of machinery and laboratory equipment to fill up on health or ammo. Even today, there are layers of detail that really enhance the immersion of raiding laboratories and warehouses without turning the game into more than it sets out to be.

Equally impressive is the game's somewhat rudimentary but impactful choices and consequences system: completing or ignoring secondary objectives will alter your experience, even across levels, while certain timed events can simply end your adventure prematurely. SiN is, in a very primitive form, a choose-your-own-adventure book, sometimes swapping out entire levels but for the most part only altering sections. It also tries to implement a feature that was especially problematic and frustrating at the time, which is stealth sections, but thankfully (and unlike many similar games), failure to stay hidden does not end your journey outright, it simply spawns a few clusters of additional enemies until you get to an alarm level and disable it.

Tonal delights

Where I feel the game really starts to shine is the music - pieces blend into one another seamlessly and enrich the atmosphere without being distracting. Each level has its own theme, alternating between the now-industry standard combination of *exploration* and *action* pieces and employing very distinct and memorable elements such as operatic vocals, synth stabs and drum machines in a really clean and I would argue timeless way. It was Zak Belica's sophomore project after Smoke Signals, but if you listen to later efforts like *Heavy Metal F.A.K.K. 2*, *Star Trek: Elite Force II* or *Infinity Blade* I think you can really appreciate the stepping stone and early brilliance of SiN's industrial yet lofty soundscape.

The voice acting is competent but has that B-movie feel, partly because the writing really doesn't want you to take the characters all that seriously and partly because J.C. is probably the most annoying radio support you'll ever find in a video game, especially when you mess up and he starts yelling your name in your panic through your headphones as you croak.

Forgive me, daddy Carmack...

for I have cursed many a time while dealing with the less than stellar aspects of SiN. I was never a fan of endlessly-spawning enemies triggered by alarms, and while 12-year old me was enthralled by the blow-up sex doll antagonist, she hasn't aged all that well nor does she provide much depth or personality beyond the informed notion that she's a brilliant scientist with a world-shattering plan.

Beyond that, though, SiN has the great merit of experimenting with many features that doubtlessly inspired countless later titles to develop game mechanics we take for granted nowadays, and some which never made a resurgence (it's probably the only FPS I can think of that has localized limb armor, and furthermore will provide fewer pieces of a specific piece of armor if you shoot certain body parts). On a good day, you can get it for around two bucks, which I feel is a bargain considering everything it entails and provides.

- Zuluf

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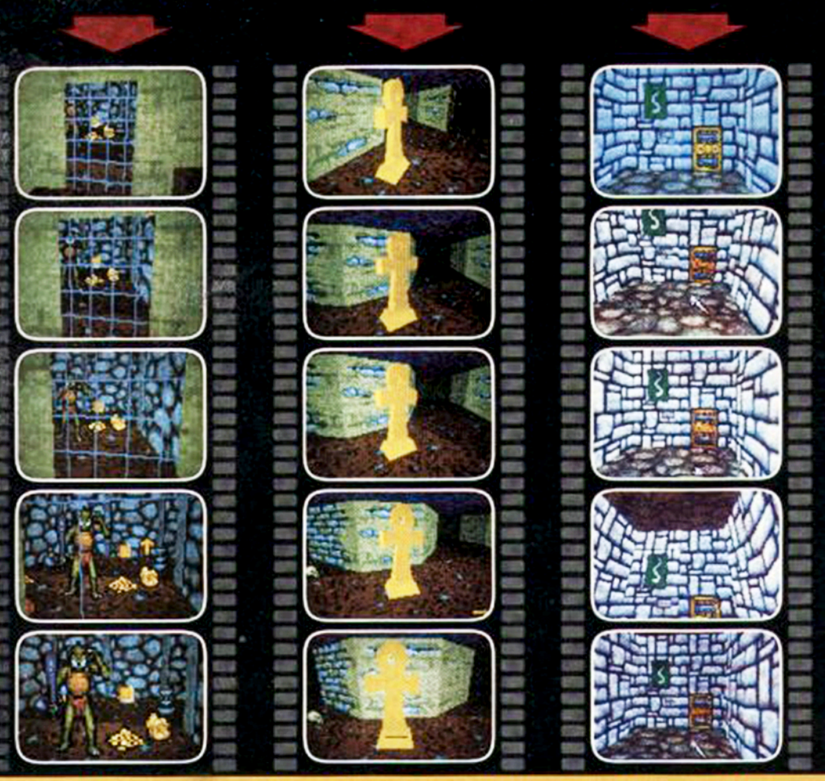

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(Atlanta Constitution)

"The 3D perspective lends an element of virtual reality not seen in other first-person adventures. A rich texture of character and story detail combine to keep a determined adventurer involved for hours."

(Los Angeles Times)

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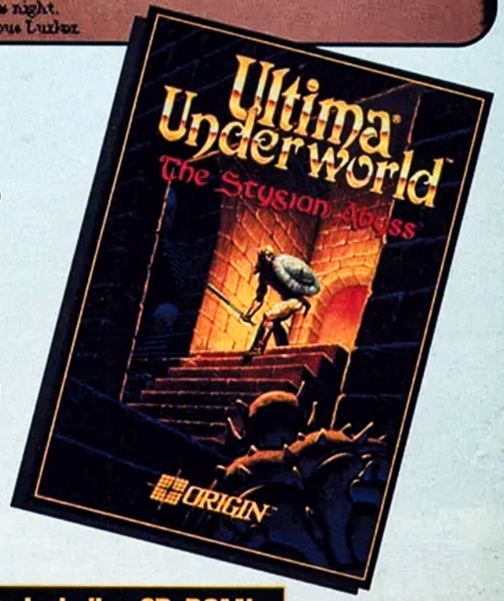

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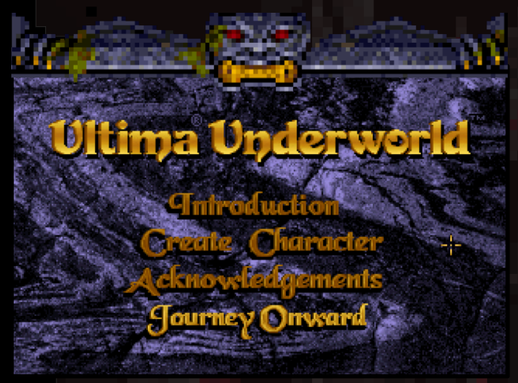
ULTIMA UNDERWORLD

Deep down into the Stygian Abyss

In the early '90s, the gaming world was on the cusp of a revolution, and few titles exemplified this transformation, setting new standards and influencing the industry in profound ways as strikingly as Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss.

A vision beyond dungeons



In the early '90s, the gaming world was on the cusp of a revolution, and few titles exemplified this transformation, setting new standards and influencing the industry in profound ways as strikingly as Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss. Released in 1992, this groundbreaking first-person role-playing game from Blue Sky Productions (which would later become the legendary Looking Glass Technologies) and published by Origin Systems, set the stage for the future of immersive gaming. The brainchild of Paul Neurath, Ultima Underworld aimed to push the boundaries of what a dungeon game could be. It was a labor of love, born from the desire to create a living, breathing world where players could lose themselves completely.

Ultima Underworld has been cited as the first role-playing game to feature first-person action in a 2.5D environment. Its design combines simulation elements with concepts from earlier role-playing video games, including Wizardry and Dungeon Master, which led the game's designers to call it a "*dungeon simulation*".

Paul Neurath

In 1990 after completing the science-fiction RPG Space Rogue at Origin Systems, Paul Neurath decided to found his own company. Origin artist Doug Wike joined Neurath, who began hiring talented MIT graduates like Doug Church and Dan Schmidt. Blue Sky Productions was born, a company designed to take role-playing games in a new direction and which was later renamed to LookingGlass - a leading US game development studio.

As creative director of the studio, Paul designed and directed the development of such acclaimed titles as Ultima Underworld, Terra Nova, Flight Unlimited, System Shock 2 and Thief, which collectively earned over a dozen game-of-the-year awards. He was also instrumental in pioneering breakthrough gaming technologies, including 3D texture mapping and photorealistic terrain.

He was the visionary behind Ultima Underworld - he wanted to create a game that not only immersed players in a rich, detailed world but also gave them unprecedented freedom to explore and interact with that world. Drawing inspiration from the likes of Wizardry and the Ultima series, Neurath and his team—comprised of talents like Doug Church and Warren Spector—set out to break new ground. They weren't just making another RPG; they were crafting an experience. After Looking Glass Studios closed down in May 2000, Paul Neurath went to Arkane Studios and created Arx Fatalis on PC, the spiritual successor to the Ultima Underworld games. Also in 2003, Neurath and some other ex-Looking Glass people at Floodgate Studios released The Shadows of Undrentide expansion pack to Bioware's Neverwinter Nights.

You are on the eighth level of the Abyss.
It is the first day of your imprisonment.
You guess that it is currently night.
You see a pack.
Casting was not successful.

The game's game engine was written by a small team. Chris Green (a talented programmer who later joined Valve) provided the game's texture mapping algorithm, which was applied to walls, floors and ceilings. Paul Neurath connected with Chris Green through his friend Ned Lerner, recognizing Green's potential to tackle the project's technical challenges. Green developed the low-level software texture mapper, the backbone of Ultima Underworld's groundbreaking graphics. Building on this foundation, Doug Church wrote the renderer, enabling the seamless integration of Green's texture mapping into the game. However, transitioning to a 3D world with free movement introduced complexities beyond graphics. The team had to consider the implications for gameplay, including collision detection, real-time physics, and player interaction within a fully immersive environment.

" We thought everyone would want to use fine mouse control for movement but threw in WASD controls at the last minute for people who couldn't handle the mouse. At the time, of course, there wasn't any standard for how to navigate a 3D environment with a keyboard and mouse."

- Dan Schmidt

The engine allowed for transparencies, walls at 45 degree angles, multiple tile heights and inclined surfaces, and other aspects. Ultima Underworld was the first video game to implement many of these effects. The game was also the first indoor, real-time, 3D first-person game to allow the player to look up and down, swim through underground rivers, and jump across chasms.

The '80s had given us a slew of dungeon crawlers, most of which were confined to grid-based movements and static visuals. Most first-person games were confined to straightforward corridors and simple textures, but unlike the linear RPGs of its day Ultima Underworld offered a sprawling, non-linear environment. Players could tackle challenges in any order, solve puzzles in multiple ways, and interact with a diverse cast of NPCs, each with their own agendas and personalities. Unlike many RPGs of the time, which often railroaded players down a predetermined path, Ultima Underworld offered multiple ways to tackle challenges. Whether you chose to evade or engage in combat was up to you, influenced by the environment and the behavior of creatures within it. This emergent behavior allowed for significant agency, making each playthrough a unique experience.

You almost had to be there to grasp what Ultima Underworld did for RPGs. After years of Wizardry, The Bard's Tale, and Might and Magic, firing up Ultima Underworld was like stepping into a new world. Tiled movement gave way to smooth, continuous movement. Instead of fixed views, you could now look around in all directions, even up and down. Flat, uniform levels were replaced with true 3D spaces, complete with slopes and dynamic, realistic lighting. The game's use of texture mapping, dynamic lighting, and physics-based interactions made the Stygian Abyss feel alive in a way that was utterly groundbreaking. It was a technical marvel, pushing the limits of what was possible on the hardware of the time. Underworld wasn't just a game—it was a revolution, transforming abstract gameplay into a living, breathing experience.

In a bold departure from the turn-based mechanics that dominated RPGs of the era, Ultima Underworld introduced real-time combat. This shift aimed to create a more immersive experience, simulating real combat in a 3D environment.

"We were a bunch of kids straight out of school. This was the first professional project we'd ever done. We felt lucky that anyone would see it at all. We'd go into a games store and see our game there on the shelf. Someone would walk up to it, and we'd want to say, "No! No! You don't want to buy that! We just hacked that together. It's not, like, a real game."

- Dan Schmidt

Dan Schmidt

Dan Schmidt got his start in the gaming industry working as a programmer for Blue Sky Prodctions/ Looking Glass Studios right out of college. He double-majored in Computer Science and Music at MIT, and leveraged both fields in his work on Ultima Underworld, developing both the creature AI and sound driver support for the game, also filling a variety of roles from project management to design to music composition.

Ultima Underworld was revolutionary, but it wasn't perfect. Gamers in 1992 could easily see it as a mixed bag. Those dynamic graphics came at a cost—overall graphic quality took a hit. The sound was synthesized and pretty low-quality. The real-time combat, while ambitious, leaned too heavily on reflexes and not enough on tactics. The control scheme didn't age well. Odd inputs like dragging with the right mouse button or using the 1 and 3 keys to look up and down felt awkward. Despite its innovations, Ultima Underworld had its share of quirks and shortcomings. Yet, it was these very imperfections that highlighted the game's ambition. Ultima Underworld was more than the sum of its parts; it was a bold step into the future of gaming, laying the groundwork for titles like System Shock and Thief. It challenged conventions, pushing both hardware and creative boundaries, and ultimately redefined what players could expect from a dungeon crawler.

"One part of one of the levels, designed by Jon, was a Pac-Man homage. You had to run around a maze, which I believe faithfully duplicated the first level of Pac-Man picking up "ore" while avoiding ghosts. How Origin let this through I'll never know, but they did have one complaint: Jon had named the ore "unobtanium" (yes, the same joke that Avatar used 20 years later), and they insisted that that name was too silly. So we changed it to "zanium" in protest...and apparently they were perfectly fine with that."

- Dan Schmidt

Anjor
Gideon
19
Greetings, traveler. What brings thee to an area of the Abyss as perilous as this? Art thou upon a quest, as I myself am?
What is thy quest?
Many years ago, I began research into methods for turning lower metals into gold. During the course of my research, I discovered a new and better method that depends on a particular, very rare substance. I quest to find more of this substance.
1. Why is this method so much better?
2. Tell me of this substance.

In the spring of 1992, the gaming world witnessed the birth of two revolutionary 3D games: Ultima Underworld and Wolfenstein 3D. Just two months after Ultima Underworld hit the shelves, id Software unleashed Wolfenstein 3D, setting the stage for a fascinating comparison between two titans of early 3D gaming. Wolfenstein 3D boasted a first-person view that filled much more of the screen and ran at a blisteringly fast frame rate on the same hardware. Players were drawn into its rapid-paced action and large, screen-filling visuals. However, these technical advantages came with trade-offs. The world of Wolfenstein 3D was far less interactive than Ultima Underworld's. Its levels were entirely flat, lacking the multi-dimensional complexity that Ultima Underworld offered, and it didn't allow players to look up or down. Wolfenstein 3D laid the groundwork for the first-person shooter genre with its emphasis on speed and simplicity. In contrast, Ultima Underworld set a new standard for RPGs, emphasizing depth, exploration, and player choice. Both games left an indelible mark on the industry, each pioneering in its own right, but catering to different aspects of what 3D gaming could be.

3D Pioneers

Catacomb 3D (1991)

Wolfenstein 3D (1992)

id Software's use of texture mapping in Catacomb 3D, a precursor to Wolfenstein 3D, was influenced by Ultima Underworld. In the book Masters of Doom, author David Kushner asserts that the concept was discussed only briefly during a 1991 telephone conversation between Paul Neurath and John Romero. However, Paul Neurath has stated multiple times that John Carmack and John Romero had seen the game's 1990 CES demo, and recalled a comment from Carmack that he could write a faster texture mapper.

Bioshock, game designer, Ken Levine, said that "*all the things that I wanted to do and all the games that I ended up working on came out of the inspiration I took from [Ultima Underworld]*". Gears of War designer Cliff Bleszinski also cited it as an early influence, stating that it had "*far more impact on me than Doom*".

Ultima Underworld was the pioneer of the *immersive simulation* genre, a term that gained traction much later. The game introduced a level of player agency that was rarely seen before. Adding to the game's depth were the autonomous factions, each with its own motivations and behaviors. Interacting with NPCs was more than just clicking through dialogue options; it was about understanding their goals and deciding how to navigate the complex social landscape of the Stygian Abyss. These factions added layers of intrigue and variety to the game, making the world feel truly alive. The dynamic ecosystem of the Abyss and the various factions added a layer of complexity and replayability that was remarkable. Underworld not only pushed boundaries in gameplay but also in storytelling and worldbuilding, laying the foundation for later titles like *System Shock*, *Deus Ex*, *Thief*, *The Elder Scrolls*, *BioShock* and *Dishonored*.

Ultima

Despite being part of the Ultima series, Ultima Underworld maintained a unique identity. Origin's decision to brand the game under the Ultima umbrella was a strategic move to leverage the series' established fan base. However, the game stood on its own merits, with deliberate efforts made to preserve its distinct character while benefiting from the Ultima name's marketing power.

The story is a classic fantasy fare: After bringing peace to Britannia, you'd think the Avatar would get a break. But haunted by ghostly dreams warning of danger, he's drawn back to Britannia. Upon arrival, he witnesses Baron Almric's daughter being kidnapped. Accused of the crime, the Avatar is thrown into the Great Stygian Abyss with a stark choice: find the girl or rot in the dungeon. The Abyss isn't just any dungeon; it's a maze of survivors from a failed colony, each with their own tales. The Avatar must navigate this social web while uncovering a plot far more sinister than a mere kidnapping.

Underworld's magic system is as immersive as the rest of its groundbreaking design. Before you can even think about casting spells, you need to find a rune bag, left behind by one of the dungeon's less fortunate explorers. This initial quest sets the tone for the game's hands-on, exploratory nature.

Once you have the rune bag, the real adventure begins. As you delve deeper into the dungeon, you'll collect runes to store in your bag. These runes are the key to the game's spellcasting system. By combining runes into specific "*recipes*" — most of which are conveniently listed in the manual — you can cast a variety of spells. This system not only adds a layer of strategy and discovery but also enhances the game's sense of physical engagement. You're not just selecting spells from a menu; you're actively assembling the components needed to weave your magic.

This approach to spellcasting underscores Ultima Underworld's commitment to creating a rich, tactile experience. Everything in the game, from movement to combat to magic, feels connected to the world, reinforcing the sense of being truly present in the Great Stygian Abyss.

My initial encounter with Underworld 1 occurred much later than the game release date, around 1999, when I stumbled upon this game through an article on the internet. At that time, I had recently completed Ultima 8, and it was during a visit to an internet cafe since having internet at home was still a luxury. I recall discovering a pirated downloadable version of Ultima Underworld on a website known as Home of the Underdogs. I remember being super excited about the game fitting on a few diskettes which I had with me, I took the game home and I was ready for an adventure. Despite its age, I found myself captivated by the game's atmosphere, and I was utterly immersed in its world for several days until I completed it. The dynamic soundtrack left a lasting impression, and it's a memory I still cherish. Remarkably, even after decades have passed, Ultima Underworld 1 continues to hold up exceptionally well, especially in the realm of RPGs. While the graphics and controls may appear dated by modern standards, the game's core experience remains solid. Its innovative approach to world-building and player agency continues to resonate with developers and gamers alike. For those of us who experienced it firsthand, it remains a cherished memory, a reminder of a time when games were beginning to discover their full potential.

In retrospect, Ultima Underworld's true legacy lies in its spirit of innovation and its commitment to creating a living, breathing world. Its influence is evident in countless modern games that prioritize player agency, immersive environments, and dynamic storytelling. For those who were there, Ultima Underworld wasn't just a game; it was a glimpse into the future of interactive entertainment.

· DOMINUS

Timeline

1992 Ultima Underworld the Stygian Abyss - the groundbreaking RPG that introduced real-time 3D dungeon exploration, combining immersive world-building with innovative gameplay mechanics.

1993 Ultima Underworld II: Labyrinth of Worlds expands on its predecessor by offering a more complex narrative and multiple interconnected worlds, while maintaining the series' signature real-time 3D exploration and deep role-

2018 Underworld Ascendant aimed to revive the spirit of the original series with a modern twist, featuring a player-driven narrative, dynamic environments, and an emphasis on creative problem-solving. Although many members of the team were original Underworld devs, the game failed to deliver a worthy experience.

PSX port

On the 14th March 1997 a complete 3D remake of the game was released for the Playstaton 1 by Infinity Entertainment and published by Electronic Arts Victor. This version was only released in Japan. All of the creatures and NPCs were recreated using polygon models, whilst the items and environments use their original textures. The HUD and inventory were reworked allowing the game to be displayed using the full screen. The character portraits were redraw in an anime style to make them more appealing to the Japanese market. Sound effects were added and a new sound track was recorded for the game. New ending and introduction videos were also added.
An English fan translation of the PSX version has been released in 2023.

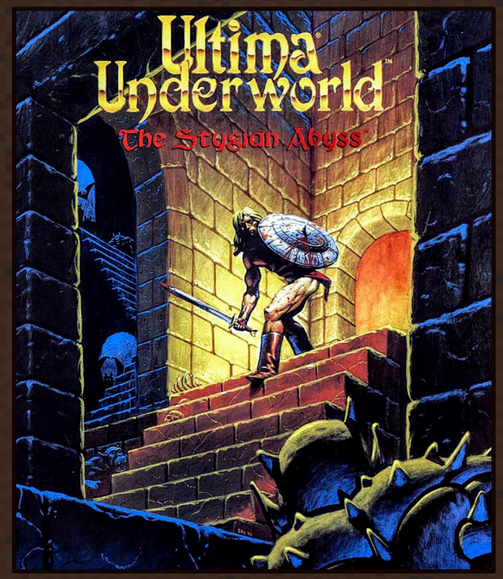
Unity source port

The Unity source port, **UnderworldExporter**, offers a modern revival of the 1992 classic. Leveraging the Unity engine, this port brings higher resolutions and smoother gameplay, significantly enhancing the visual experience and making the controls more intuitive with features like mouse look. The updated audio, including higher-quality soundtracks from MIDI, Soundblaster, and PlayStation 1 versions, enriches the game's atmospheric depth. This is a significant upgrade that not only makes the game more visually appealing on contemporary screens but also enhances the immersive experience that Ultima Underworld is renowned for. Mouse look functionality, another modern touch, transforms navigation within the game's 3D spaces, making it more intuitive and fluid. Setting up the Unity port does require some technical know-how. Players need the original game files, which can be configured to work with the port following community-provided guides. Despite these enhancements, some bugs remain, a common issue in fan-driven projects. For those willing to delve into the technical setup, the Unity port of Ultima Underworld is a must-try, offering a beautifully modernized gateway into one of the most influential RPGs of all time. Whether you're a veteran adventurer of the Abyss or a new explorer, this updated version is a testament to the enduring legacy of Ultima Underworld.

Box cover art

Source: Ultima Codex

Though **Denis Loubet** is widely recognized for creating the art the graced the cover and manual for Ultima Underworld, the actual concept for the box art came from Warren Spector, who submitted numerous ideas and sketches to Paul Neurath and Richard Garriott for approval. Here are a few of those submissions:



There are also a couple of scanned facsimilie cover sheets, addressed from Warren Spector to Paul Neurath, asking for comment and approval on the sketches. Some of the sketches also have penciled-in comments, probably from Paul Neurath, asking questions about (or suggesting changes to) different designs. For example, on one sketch — depicting the Slasher of Veils and the wizard Tyball looming over a cowering (and sexily-posed/scantily-clad) Arial, Neurath comments that: "*the girl's pose should probably change (maybe more clothes…)*".

And of course, something very similar to the final cover design appears in the set as well. Although at some point, Spector's initial sketch (depicting the Avatar holding a torch at the top of a stairwell) changed a bit (with the Avatar's pose becoming more combat-ready, and with the torch being replaced by a shield).

BIG BOX

What's the most iconic gaming aspect of the 90s if not big boxes? These oversized, often elaborate boxes weren't just packaging, to the treasures hidden inside — manuals, maps, and trinkets — they were a statement of the game's immersive experience. From detailed artwork to exclusive goodies, collecting these big box editions is a nostalgia-fueled journey and for the big box collectors, they're a tangible link to a golden age of gaming, where the box was as much a part of the adventure as the pixels on the screen.

Role-playing games, in particular, often featured boxes packed with "feelies" designed to enhance the gaming experience, and Ultima Underworld stands out as a prime example.

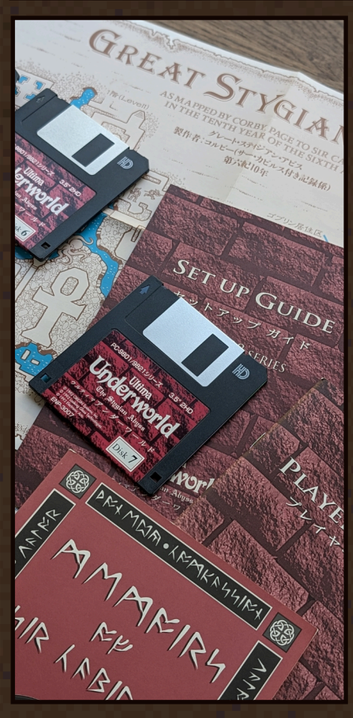
U.S. big box version

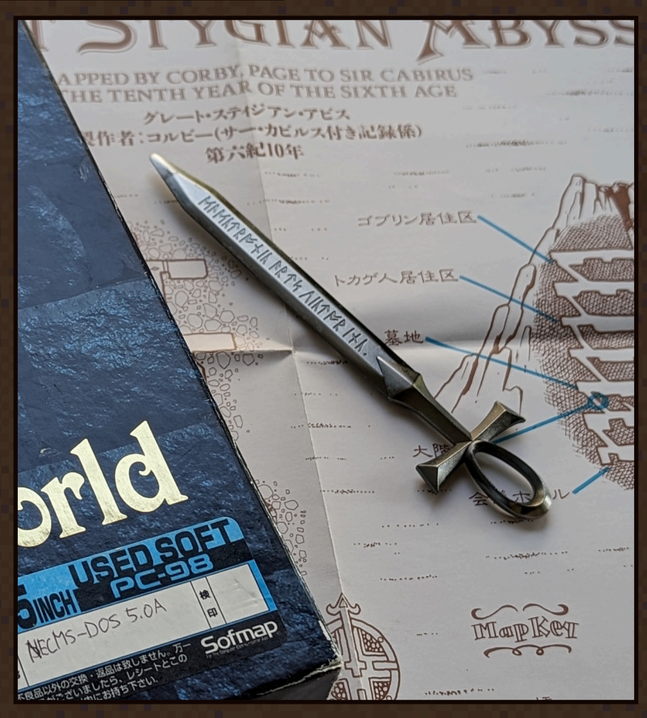
The U.S. big box release I have in my collection is the “Special Promotional Release” which is a misleading title, because this version was just a marketing gimmick to get rid of stock, in fact this version is missing the bag with runes that the standard edition have. Th items includeeed in the box are: Memoirs of Sir Cabirus, the Players Guide, an install guide, a reference card, a paper map of the first level, 5x 5.25" or 4x 3.5" FD, a registration card and the Origin Catalog from 1992/93.

Also pictured here is the Cluebook - Mysteries of the Abyss, a book that was bought separately that had hints, tips and a walktrough of the whole game.

Japan big box version

The Japanese big box is quite rare and I was lucky to buy a complete one and in very good condition from an auction websit from Japan. The box is a bit smaller than th U.S. one and the cover art is slighty different, with the artwork smaller on the cover. The PC-9801 box contains, besides the 7x 3.5" FD, the Memoirs of Sir Cabirus, the Player's Guide, the setup guide, the operations guide, also a set of translated manuals, a paper map (slightly different layout as original) as well as an ankh-shaped paperknife as trinket. Ultima Underworld was one of the earlier games released under the 'Electronic Arts Victor' label in Japan.





Forget serious fantasy epics – Simon the Sorcerer is the comedy magic romp you didn't know you needed. Released back in 1993, this point-and-click adventure drops you into a wild magical world through the eyes of Simon, a teenage wizard who's way more interested in cracking jokes than casting perfect spells. Think less Lord of the Rings, more smartass teenager accidentally saving the day.

A magical tale and a true classic that showcases the very best of 90s adventure gaming. Simon the Sorcerer's wit, charm, and imagination shine as brightly today as they did upon its release.

As someone who first encountered this game by downloading a pirated copy from *The Home of the Underdogs* website from the 90s, I have a special connection to Simon's the Sorcerer's adventures. I still remember the hours spent laboriously recreating the copy protection manual just to start the game. But let me tell you, it was worth every painstaking minute. The game was complete, but it lacked a manual. To start playing, you had to pass a copy protection screen that required identifying specific symbols on a compass from various pages of the manual. Without the manual, I had to repeatedly attempt to start the game, noting down which symbols worked and which did not. After numerous tries, I managed to create my own makeshift "manual" by partially recreating the symbols and their corresponding pages. I still have those notes!

Simon's adventure begins on his 12th birthday when all he wants is a Gameboy. Instead, he gets a magical book called Ye Olde Spellbooke, a stray dog named Chippy, and a one-way trip to a dimension of magic and monsters. It's a premise that could have been trite, but in the hands of Adventure Soft, it becomes a vehicle for razor-sharp wit and delightful subversion of fantasy tropes. Our protagonist, sporting the requisite ponytail and pointy hat of all proper sorcerers, must rescue the wizard Calypso from the evil Sordid. It's a setup that wouldn't be out of place in a children's book, but Simon the Sorcerer is anything but childish. The game revels in its irreverence, peppering the dialogue with sarcasm, mild curse words, and enough double entendres to entertain the adult players.

A Familiar Formula

Players familiar with LucasArts adventures will feel right at home with Simon's interface. The screen is split into two sections: a list of commands on the left (including standards like "Walk To" and "Pick Up," as well as more unusual options like "*Consume*" and "*Wear*") and your inventory on the right. It's a tried-and-true system that works well, allowing for intuitive interactions and plenty of experimentation. One of Simon the Sorcerer's strengths is its open structure. From the outset, you have access to a vast world filled with dense forests, icy mountains, swamps, and craggy cliffs. This freedom to explore is both exhilarating and, at times, overwhelming. The lack of clear direction can occasionally lead to aimless wandering, but the thrill of discovery more than makes up for any momentary frustration. The puzzles range from straightforward to fiendishly clever, with a difficulty curve that ramps up nicely as you progress. While there's usually only one solution to each problem, the ability to work on multiple tasks simultaneously keeps the gameplay fresh and engaging. And for those moments when you're truly stuck, the in-game hint system (in the form of a verbose owl) provides gentle nudges in the right direction. Similar to LucasArts' adventures, it is impossible to get irrevocably stuck or die in Simon the Sorcerer. The game world features dozens of interconnected screens, most of which are accessible from the start. While there is usually only one solution to each puzzle, players can work on multiple tasks simultaneously, with exploration being a significant part of the game. Important locations are marked on the map for instant access upon discovery, eliminating the need to retrace steps to revisit them. Adventure Soft used the Monkey Island formula very closely but this approach makes Simon the Sorcerer easy to learn and gives it a comfortable, familiar feel.

A World of Parody

Simon the Sorcerer shines brightest in its writing and world-building. The game is a treasure trove of references and parodies, drawing inspiration from fairy tales, fantasy literature, and pop culture. Fans of Tolkien will chuckle at nods to "The Fiery Pits of Rondor," while more general fantasy tropes are lovingly skewered at every turn, including Rapunzel, The Chronicles of Narnia, Jack and the Beanstalk.

The game doesn't limit itself to fantasy parodies, though. Political jabs and fourth-wall-breaking asides keep players on their toes, never quite sure what to expect next. It's this unpredictability that makes exploring Simon's world such a joy. Since dying isn't a concern in Simon the Sorcerer, you can freely experiment with different commands and interact with objects in each scene. Simon often responds with amusing remarks, making the game more enjoyable as you explore.

Visual Splendor in just 256 Colors

Graphically, Simon the Sorcerer is a feast for the eyes, pushing the limits of what was possible with 256-color VGA. The backgrounds, hand-drawn and meticulously detailed, bring the fantasy world to life with a vibrancy that still impresses today. From the gnarled trees of the dense forests to the icy peaks of the mountains, every location is a work of art. The game's graphics were entirely hand-drawn on paper, then

Walk to

Look at

scanned and manually colored using computer software. The character designs are equally impressive, with fluid animations that give each inhabitant of this strange world a unique personality. Simon himself has one of the best idle animations in gaming history, pulling out a personal stereo to listen to some tunes – a delightful touch that perfectly encapsulates the game's blend of fantasy and modern sensibilities.

Special mention must be made of the attention to detail in the environment. The designers went above and beyond, adding little touches like leaves blowing in the wind or distant animals roaming the landscape. These small animations breathe life into the world, making it feel like a living, breathing place rather than a static backdrop. A little artistic detail that I really love is that every screen, whether essential to the story or not, features rocks and cliffs eerily designed to resemble faces. It might be a bold statement but I would even say that Simon's graphics surpass those of a LucasArts game from that era.

The later enhanced editions of the game available on platforms like Steam and iOS suffer from extremely poor upscaled graphics. Do yourself a favor and play the game with the original pixel art for the best experience.

Sound & Music

The audio in Simon the Sorcerer is every bit as impressive as its visuals. The later "talkie" CD-ROM version features full voice acting, a rarity for the time, which brings the characters to life in vibrant detail. Simon's dry, sarcastic delivery is pitch-perfect, and the supporting cast matches him quip for quip. But it's the musical score, composed by Media Sorcery (Adam Gilmore and Mark McLeod), that truly elevates the experience. The soundtrack perfectly captures the whimsical, magical atmosphere of the game world. It's one of those rare game scores that you'll find yourself humming long after you've stepped away from the computer.

A Labour of Love

The story behind Simon the Sorcerer's creation is almost as interesting as the game itself. Mike Woodroffe, the game's director and producer, saw an opportunity in the market for comic adventure games following the success of Monkey Island 2. His son, Simon, penned the script, drawing inspiration from Terry Pratchett (Adventure Soft had initially hoped to make a Discworld game but was unable to obtain a license). Simon Woodroffe explained that the character of Simon was inspired by a mix of Blackadder, Rincewind, and Guybrush, and was initially conceived as a trainee wizard, similar to Harry Potter. The world was designed around the characters rather than the puzzles, with the story built to fit the

characters the team found appealing. The development team was small but passionate, with everyone sharing the same vision for the game. This unified approach allowed Adventure Soft to punch above its weight, creating a game that could stand toe-to-toe with offerings from more established studios.

A Few Rough Pixel Edges

No game is perfect, and Simon the Sorcerer does have its share of flaws. The walking speed can be frustratingly slow, especially when backtracking through familiar areas. The lack of a comprehensive map system can lead to moments of confusion, as it's not always clear which direction will lead to a new screen. Some puzzles require leaps of intuition that might leave some players reaching for a walkthrough. And while the hint system is helpful, sitting through the owl's long-winded explanations can test one's patience. It's also worth noting that some of the humor hasn't aged particularly well. While most of the jokes still land, a few references and quips might fly over the heads of modern players or come across as dated.

Simon's Legacy

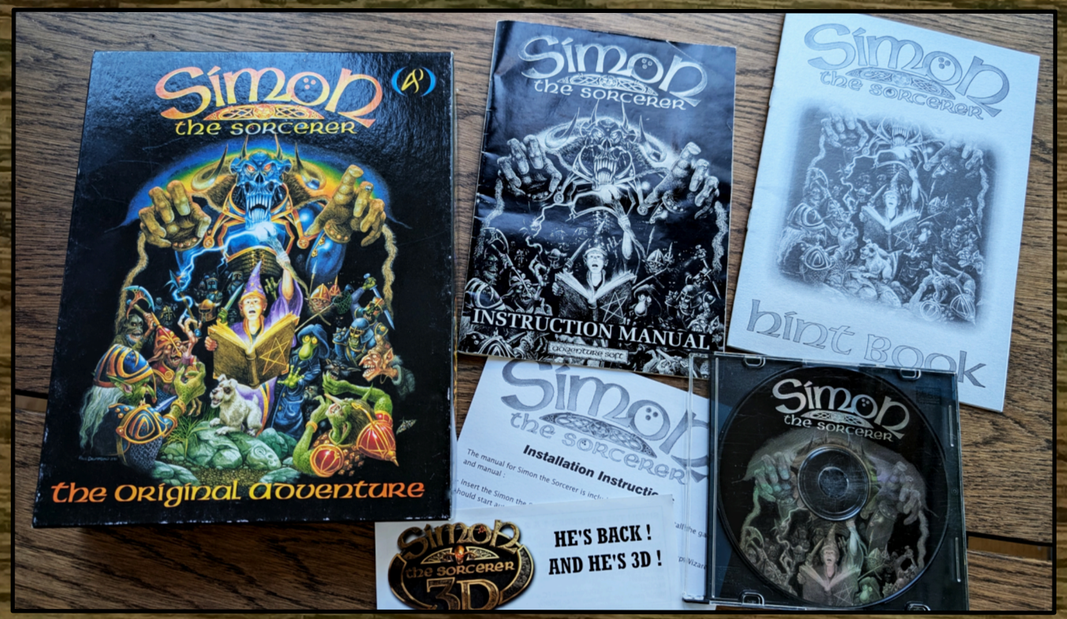
Simon the Sorcerer is more than just a relic of the past – it's a shining example of what made the golden age of adventure games so special. Its blend of sharp writing, beautiful artwork, clever puzzles, and memorable characters creates an experience that transcends its technological limitations. Whether you're a long-time fan looking to revisit a childhood favorite or a newcomer curious about the classics of the genre, Simon the Sorcerer offers a magical journey well worth taking. It's a game that reminds us of a time when imagination and wit could create worlds just as immersive and engaging as any modern, big-budget production.

Simon the Sorcerer went on to spawn a series of sequels, but for many fans, the original remains the high point of the franchise. It's achieved a well-deserved cult status, with a dedicated fanbase that continues to celebrate the game decades after its release. For a quick nostalgia fix (or a first-time experience), the game can be played directly in your browser through the Internet Archive.

There are countless reasons why I regard this game as one of the best adventure games ever made. Simon the Sorcerer stands as a testament to the power of good storytelling and creative game design. It's a piece of gaming history that deserves to be remembered, celebrated, and most importantly, played.

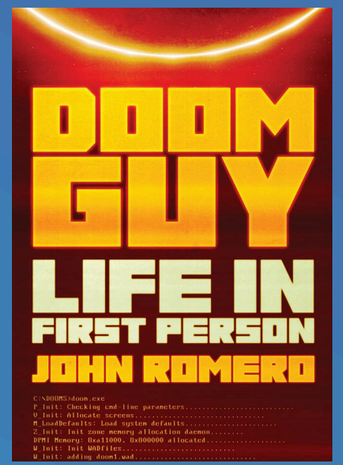
- Dominus

Simon the Sorerer is probably one of the only games from the '90s that can still be purchased online from the original developer in the original big box format! Maker sure you visit adventuresoft.com There are many variants of the game boxes the game was shipped with For DOS, Windows, Amiga, Sega Saturn, etc but I want to show you my favorite big boxes, that I also have in my collection, the U.K. re-release from 1998 but with a newer CD - the version I purchased from AdventureSoft. The other one below is the U.S. release by Infocom which benefits from a really beautiful box art with gatefold cover and embossing, like a real tome of fantastic tales. Both U.K and U.S. releases had separate versions for CD and 3.5" diskettes.



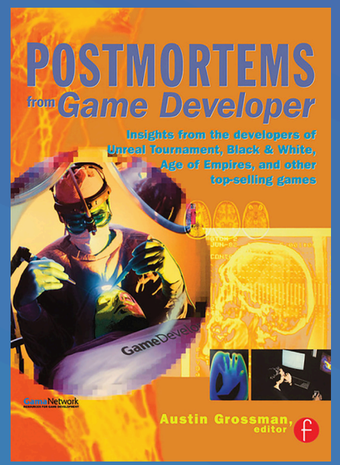
SIMON THE SORCERER
THE INTERACTIVE FANTASY WITH AN ATTITUDE
INFOCOM
GETTING STARTED
DISK 1
DO YOU WISH YOU HAD A CLUE?
DO YOU WANT TO SAVE SOME MONEY?
SIMON SAYS YOU DO!

Recommended reading



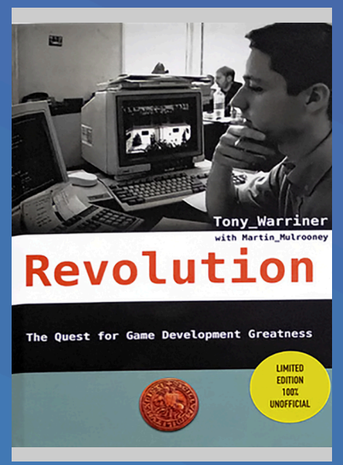
Doom Guy – Life in First Person

A compelling autobiography by John Romero, the legendary game designer behind the iconic game Doom. Romero provides an intimate look at his life, career, and the creation of some of the most influential games in history. Readers gain insight into the challenges and triumphs of game development, as well as Romero's personal journey in the industry. This book is a fascinating read for fans of gaming and those interested in the stories behind the games that shaped a generation. The book also explores his entrepreneurial ventures and the lessons learned from both successes and failures. I listened to the Audible version of this book, narrated by Romero himself, and I highly recommend it, it is an abolultety fantastic listen, Romero's storytelling captures the excitement, creativity, and relentless drive that defined his career and shaped the gaming world.


POSTMORTEMS
from Game Developer
Insights from the developers of Unreal Tournament, Black & White, Age of Empires, and other top-selling games
Austin Grossman, editor

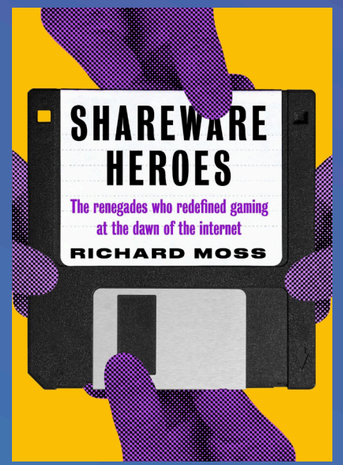
Postmortems from Game Developer

If you want to know the story behindsome of the biggest game hits of the 90's & early 2000's this is a must-have read! Editor Austin Grossman (ex Looking Glass dev) has expertly compiled and commented on the postmortems to bring insight to this Game Developer magazine collection. The book covers a wide range of games like Diablo 2, Black and White, Age of Empires, Thief, Deux Ex, System Shock 2, Unreal Tournament, Tiberian Sun and many others. The book gathers in-depth reflections from top developers on their most iconic projects, offering a rare glimpse into the successes, challenges, and lessons learned in the game industry. It's a comprehensive guide that celebrates the creativity, dedication, and problem-solving prowess required to bring games to life.



Revolution

This massive 646-page book is a captivating dive into the world of game development, tracing the evolution of Revolution Software. Tony Warriner, one of the co-founders, offers a behind-the-scenes look at the creation of iconic games like Broken Sword. His narrative is engaging and insightful, providing a rich blend of personal anecdotes and industry history. This memoir is a must-read for gaming enthusiasts and anyone interested in the intricate process of game creation. It's a heartfelt homage to the passion and creativity that drive the gaming industry. It showcases stunning, high-quality full-color photographs and scans that vividly bring the story to life. For game developers, this is a must-read. Tony's writing style instantly evokes the narrative storytelling that Revolution is known for.

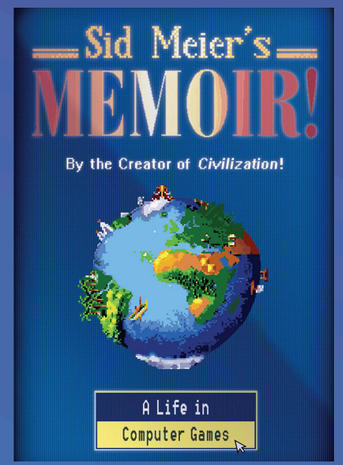


Shareware Heroes

Shareware Heroes is a comprehensive, meticulously researched exploration of an important and too-long overlooked chapter in video game history

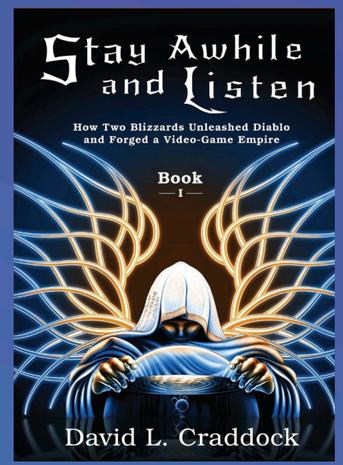
It takes readers on a journey, from the beginnings of the shareware model in the early 1980s, the origins of the concept, even the name itself, and the rise of shareware's major players - the likes of id Software, Apogee, and Epic MegaGames when commercial game publishers turned away from them.

This book explores how shareware developers plugged gaps in the video gaming market by creating games in niche and neglected genres like vertically-scrolling shoot-'em-ups or racing games or RPGs, until finally, as the video game market again grew and shifted, and major publishers took control, how the shareware system faded into the background and fell from memory.



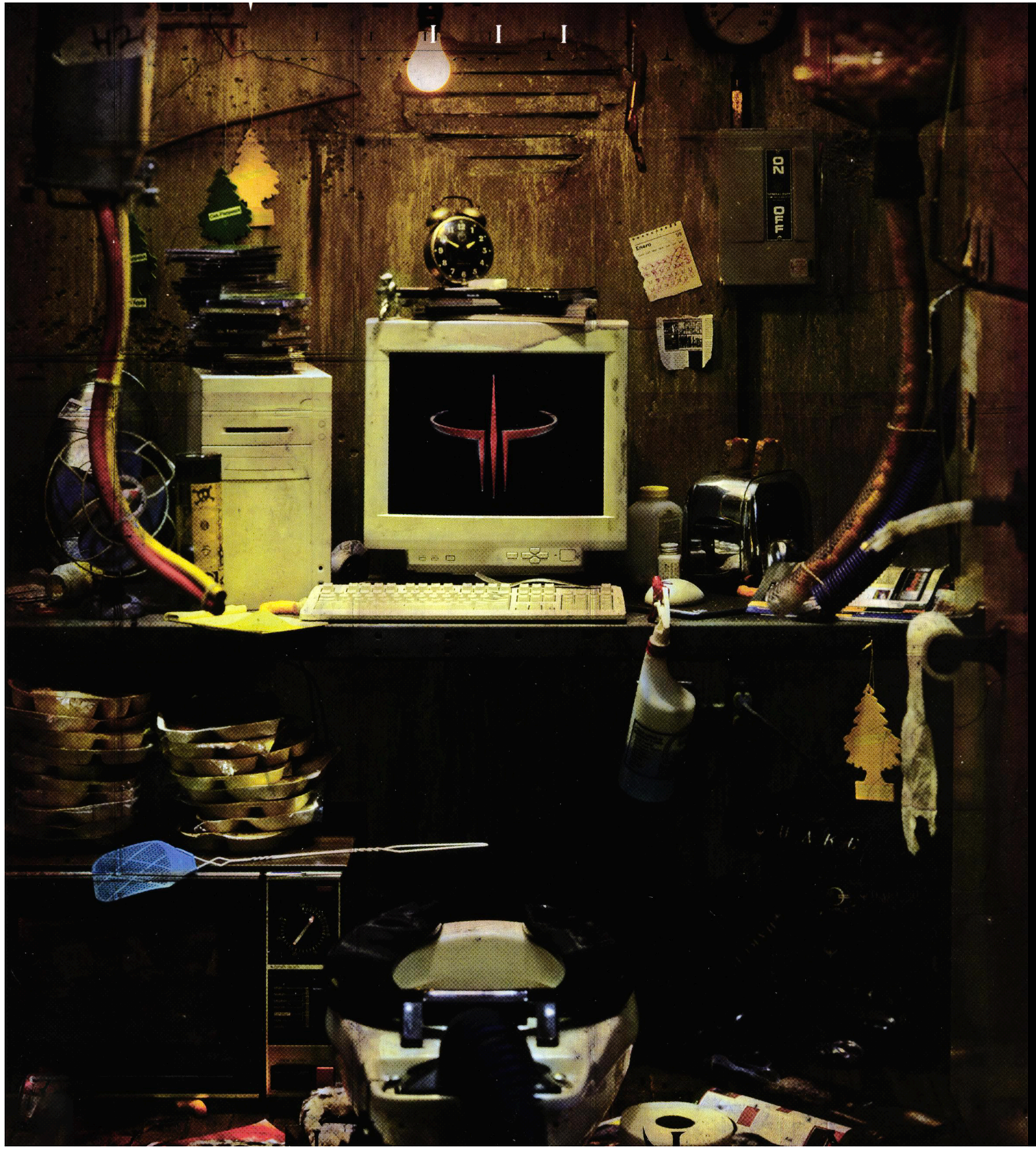
Sid Meier's MEMOIR!

This book is a journey through the golden age of video game design, told by the legendary creator of Civilization. Part industry history, part personal narrative, Meier takes readers behind the scenes of some of gaming's most iconic titles with wit, humility, and insider insight. From early programming days to building a gaming empire, this book is a must-read for anyone fascinated by the pioneers who transformed interactive entertainment. He pulls back the curtain on legendary titles like Pirates!, Railroad Tycoon, and Civilization, offering readers an intimate look at the creative process, technical challenges, and moments of unexpected inspiration that shaped these groundbreaking games.



Stay Awhile and Listen

This is a book wih a very meticulously crafted narrative that resurrects the origin story of one of gaming's most transformative development studios. David Craddock goes far beyond a simple corporate history, instead offering an intimate oral history of Blizzard's early days. The book captures the raw creativity, wild ambition, and unexpected moments of genius that birthed Diablo, a game that would redefine the action RPG genre and launch a franchise that would captivate millions. For anyone who's ever clicked through the dark dungeons of Diablo or wondered about the magic behind Blizzard's legendary games, this book is an essential, compelling read that brings the era of gaming's wild frontier to vivid life.



It's now safe to turn off your computer.